DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 313 CG 009 682

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TITLE The Counselor in the Institutional Structure.
PUB DATE 74
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Western Psychological Association (54th, San Francisco, California, April 25-28, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Environment; *Counseling Centers; *Counselor Functions; *Higher Education; *Institutional Role; Speeches; *Student College Relationship; *Student Personnel Services

ABSTRACT

The value of the college counseling center has been to symbolize the concern for students of the basically depersonalized institutional bureaucracy. The center has permitted others on campus to avoid becoming involved with students. By localizing the problems which are presented by clients within the clients themselves, counselors defuse any questioning of the institution's role in generating student problems. Counselors cannot operate in a manner which ignores their assigned role in the bureaucratic structure. Counselors, although their training has led them to believe that they would be performing essential functions, are actually in a peripheral position in relation to their institution. Most counselors are supporters of the status quo and seem to hold the same biases in regard to sex- and ethnic minority-appropriate behavior as do people in general. Counselors are their own worst enemies in becoming more effective in their institutional settings because of their tendency to look inward rather than outward for the locus of problems. They must reevaluate their attitudes toward social change not only in relation to their clients but also in relation to themselves. (Author/BW)

ED105313

Western Psychological Association Convention - 1974
San Francisco, California

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THE COUNSELOR IN THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

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The college campus should be different because of the presence of professional counselors. The truth is, however, that the great majority of those in the college community have not even known that a counseling center existed. . . Walk on almost any campus and try to find the center - physically, most of them are out of it so far as the consciousness of students is concerned. . . Tucked away in parts of buildings abandoned by a succession of decreasingly prestigious departments or off in an inconspicuous corner of the administrative control tower. Ask students for directions and the probability is that you will be greeted by a blank look.

In my judgment, the value of counseling centers has been more symbolic than real - symbolic of the basically depersonalized institutional bureaucracy's concern for students. So long as the center exists, the administration has an answer for the parents of confused and upset students who question institutional operations or procedures: they are able to say "He ought to talk to one of our counselors." So long as the center exists, other staff on campus can sluff off their responsibilities for dealing with students in other than their role of instructor, dean or director. The counseling center may actually have retarded the development of more personal and humane ways of dealing with students by personnel throughout the institution by offering them a painless alternative to their investing their time and energy in searching for ways of better handling the problems of students at the points where those problems are revealed. . . or where they may, in fact, be generated. The counseling center has provided a convenient safety valve for

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diminishing pressures, created for human beings by the rigidities of the bureaucratic system and the depersonalizing operations of its specialists.

One example comes immediately to mind. . . the counseling center has been given or taken upon itself the task of educational-vocational counseling for the entire institution. One result has been that at the department and school level, personnel become involved in working with students on their future plans primarily as a means of recruiting students to their field who fit the faculty member's stereotype of "the good student" and discouraging those who do not fit that stereotype. The latter may find their way to the counseling center where a counselor, who probably knows very little about the details of the departments in the college or the occupations for which they prepare students, attempts to facilitate the student's transition to some other academic area where he may be more acceptable. The counselor, despite the emphasis in the counseling literature on self-concepts, personality types, need fulfillment and other psychological concepts, is likely to abstract the issues involved in terms of pragmatic generalizations which can be derived from grades, statements about achievements and interests, and the results of a few tests. In any case, the counselor deals with the student as the focus of the student's own problems. . . even if he senses that the student is being poorly served by the department or school personnel, he generally restricts his attention to factors which the client himself can affect. At no point is the counselor likely to seek any other informational inputs than those which can be supplied by the client much less to contribute any of his observations or evaluations to the appropriate personnel on campus involved in the case.

The point is that even if the student is a victim of the system or the prejudices of a particular faculty member, the counselor maintains his private practice posture and confines his service to that which can be encompassed within the counseling room. He assigns problems to the student to the exclusion of the

institution's role in generating and maintaining them. With his private practice and science orientation, the counselor is encouraged to measure the present status of his client and to neglect the possible effects of the social system on the client. This has handicapped him in working with ethnic minorities, women and social deviants who do not fit the norms. In my example, for instance, the student who arrives for counseling on the Oregon State campus may be a young woman who has hoped to enter forestry or fish and wildlife. If she happens to fall into the hands of some of our professors, her advising would consist of a formidable listing of obstacles to her surviving the program and the obvious fact that there are almost no women employed in these fields. To a freshman or sophomore woman confronted directly, perhaps for the first time, with naked discrimination and, perhaps, hostility, this can be a traumatic experience. If the counselor simply concentrates on the problem as that of the young woman, he will end up doing little more than reinforcing the biases and prejudices of the gatekeepers in these predominantly all-male fields. And make no mistake about it, our counselors have readily accepted this role while assuring themselves that they were somehow helping the student to cope with reality - a reality as defined by institutional and societal managers.

Most counselors have not related themselves to the larger issues of their institution or society. They have paid little attention to the implications of their philosophical underpinnings. Whatever their operational style, be it derived from Rogers, Williamson, Carkhuff or Patterson, the implicit assumption is populist in simplicity - that each individual has within himself all he needs to better himself or arrive at decisions which will fulfill him as a person. In a sense, the counselor is radical in his commitment to individual self-realization but conservative in supporting the basic values of the institution and relationships within the institution. Unfortunately, most counselors are not consciously

aware of the potential conflict although I feel that they sense their helplessness and express their frustrations through complaints about their own institutional position in relation to the director, the dean of students, their salary level, the faculty and the like. What they try to accomplish with students through encouraging them to come to an accommodation with their situation through self-examination, they are not able to do very successfully for themselves.

As a person, the counselor is subject to the same feelings about his work as any other employee. He is affected by his environment as any other worker. We have done very little investigation of the counselor as an employee. The counseling literature concerns itself almost exclusively with his relationships with his clients and his work techniques. But the counselor's personal life situation does affect his professional behavior. What he does as a counselor tends to be dictated by his need to preserve his job security and enhance his chances for increased status and salary. If his children are agreeably situated in school, if his wife has begun to work her way through the chairs of the Faculty Women's Club, if he is in the process of paying off a mortgage, the counselor is likely to be cautious in the conduct of his counseling activities and his interactions with administrative personnel. On the other hand, until the recent tightening of the job market, young counselors have typically moved from job to job in search of greater insitutional rewards and sometimes chasing the elusive grail of self-actualization. Many have stayed in one institution hardly long enough to learn about the different departments and programs and, yet, from the first day on the job, they have been considered adequate to the task of offering appropriate educational and vocational guidance to confused undergraduates.

We have assumed that the counselor becomes somehow bigger and better than himself as a person when he enters his cubicle with a client. He may have had an argument with his wife or the director just before entering the counseling

room, but he is expected to shed his personal concerns at the door and become almost magically the counselor of unconditional positive regard. In my judgment, we cannot study counselor behavior independent of either his day-to-day personal concerns or his institutional ties. He is a worker on a job like any other worker and an integral part of the institution.

The institutional counselor must make compromises between his ideals as a humanist and the job demands. Units of counselor production are defined by the administrator to whom the counseling center reports although most counselors have maintained an illusion of freedom through the simple expedient of not testing limits. However, now that they are becoming somewhat more active on campus, they are bumping up against those invisible barriers they didn't know existed. At Oregon State, virtually all of the outreach activities which I initiated as director of the center have, under the direction of an institutional research oriented person, withered away and the major activity is a so-called experimental studies program which involves the counselors essentially as academic advisors and vocational guidance personnel. The center, incidentally, has been moved to the third floor of a new administration building labeled variously the Power Tower or the Administration Hilton. After visiting a number of other counseling centers around the country, I know that we are not altogether unique at Oregon State although this is often the first charge which is made about my views of the state of college counseling.

It should come as no surprise that a hiring institution should want its money's worth in maintaining a counseling center staff. The surprise is in the fact that almost no attention has been paid to the effect of the bureaucratic structure, with its formalized hierarchy and specialized personnel, on the role of the institutional counselor. There has been almost no discussion in the literature until very recently of the potential incompatibility of the goals of

counseling and the needs of persons to succeed in the bureaucracy. The personal needs of people in a bureaucracy for power, status and money rewards may bring the idealized goals of the counselor in direct conflict with the needs of the institution. It should be abundantly clear that counselors cannot operate in a manner which ignores their assigned role in the structure. . . that if they are to modify their services, they must do so in ways which enhance the operations of other personnel and do not appear to jeopardize the positions of others in the bureaucratic structure. The counselor's behavior, too, is affected by his need to preserve his security and enhance his chances for increased status and salary. He is not an independent practitioner.

Despite the counseling literature which emphasizes the interactions of two human beings in the counseling room, the institutional counselor does not meet a client on a person-to-person basis but rather in his institutional role. The institutional managers determine what functions of the counselor are proper for him to perform and define legitimate student problems. I should add that the counselors may be given some latitude in pursuing a small quiet underground practice in a particular field of interest or on the basis that variety is needed for their educational development. In one university which I visited, the counseling center staff had been forbidden by the president from doing therapy: however, most of the counselors did carry one or two personal problem clients as part of their case load and either did not report them or assigned them to some bland counseling category. A few marriage cases which involve spouses who are not enrolled students may also be permitted so long as their numbers do not become obvious or constitute a significant part of the counselor's case load.

The point is that counselors have had to adapt to the structure and maintain a low profile as their means of survival in the bureaucracy. The irony is that the training of counselors has given them a view of themselves as central in

whatever situation they find themselves. That the counselors on most campuses are actually in a peripheral position in relation to their institution is one reason, I believe, that new counselors so often begin to search for another job within the first year or two while expressing their frustrations with the lack of appreciation for their work through gripes about their salaries or the lack of funds available for furniture, equipment and the like.

The counselor protects himself from the full impact of the reality of his general powerlessness in the institution by his orientation to intervening on behalf of a student - even when the student is caught in a situation which he is powerless to change himself. The counseling literature tends to support the counselor's inactivity through the rationalization that intercession on the part of the counselor would reduce the client's initiative and make him more dependent. The purity of this rationale neglects the realities of the bureaucracy which deals not in personal expression terms, but rather in power relationships.

The role of power (or influencing others) in the relationship between people has not been given much thought by counselors. Academic people generally have tended to avoid the issue of power, feeling that it is (or should be) irrelevant in conflict resolution. Counselors have assumed that rational behavior governs human interactions and their work with students has tended to reflect this belief. . . They forget that, as Stubbins and Halleck have pointed out, every counseling contact is a political act. . . either encouraging change or reaffirming the status quo. Counseling theories tend to emphasize the release of assertive impulses even though the counselor himself may be powerless (has little influence) in his own situation outside the counseling room. The counselor works on the assumption that each client can achieve personal salvation through his own efforts regardless of the social and institutional forces impinging on him. Counselors are predisposed to view the problems of their clients as their inability to adapt

properly but he is poorly equipped to assess those factors in the client's situation which are causing legitimate maladaptive behaviors.

The underlying assumption has been that the client's problem is within the client's head. . . that he has within himself all the resources he needs to change his situation for the better. . . even if he is in an impossible power situation. Counseling has been an extension of the American Dream. . . that any man can be whatever he wants to be if only he has the motivation and applies his resources properly. Unfortunately, it has had the practical effect of slowing down or aborting social or institutional change for it never questions whether the social or institutional situation itself might not be to blame not only for the present client's problem but those of many others in the same category.

I would, in this regard, call your attention to the fact that ethnic minority college students invariably report that they have entered college despite discouragements by the counselors with whom they have talked. Moreover, the research on counselor biases in regard to women reported in the special issue on women of "The Counseling Psychologist" would seem to indicate that women, particularly with non-traditional life goals, are unlikely to be treated as persons with the same access to the positive human characteristics attributed to mature males.

The discouraging thing to me is that there appears to be little doubt that most counselors hold the same biases for sex- and minority-appropriate behavior held by people-in-general. Unfortunately, counselors have, in the glow of their unconditional positive regard, not even been dimly aware of their biases, and, in this respect, are all the more dangerous to the vulnerable people with whom they work.

College counselors are in a very precarious position on many campuses, I do not feel that their situation is necessarily terminal, although I have received some rather gloomy predictions from counselors and directors who have read my

books. It seems obvious, however, that the profession must engage in some significant self-evaluation. My raising questions about the position of counselors in the bureaucratic structure results from my feeling that our worst enemy right now is lack of awareness and apathy, due to the counselor's tendency to look inward rather than outward. Counselors must be willing to rethink their role in the institutional setting and to give up their illusions about their effectiveness in the narrow role they have defined for themselves. They must also be willing to reexamine the values they hold in regard to the social and institutional scene and what effect their values may have on maintaining the status quo. A crisis is often necessary to shake a group out of its complacency. My hope is that the current crisis in college counseling will result in positive steps being taken to redefine the institutional roles of counseling psychologists and a significant reevaluation on the part of individual counselors of their own attitude toward social change as it affects their interactions with clients.